

Facing Weakness and Self-Doubt in Ministry



by ESTHER LIU

When we prepare for ministry, we often have a certain image of what it will look like. We hope to be fruitful, helpful, and make a difference, to be a blessing and light to others. We go in with the best of intentions only to find that—ministry is *difficult*. And those difficulties quickly bring us face-to-face with our weakness and self-doubt. The situations we face are more complex and tumultuous than we were prepared for. Our responsibilities seem beyond our competency and resources. We confront our weaknesses, limitations, and lack of wisdom. Circumstances arise that expose we do not have all the answers. Our decisions leave us feeling unsure—or perhaps we make a decision that is not received well by others. We face tasks that expose our insecurities and shortcomings; temptations and struggles reveal we don't have it all together. There will be problems we will not know how to fix and expectations we may not be able to meet. We do not have it all figured out. We do not have all the answers. We feel anxious more often than we feel confident.

Not only can ministry responsibilities be difficult, but how we feel about ourselves can be difficult too. Our inner self-reflections add trouble to our trouble. What do we do with these hard feelings? Some of

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us berate ourselves and despair in our weakness. We say to ourselves, “If only I could be more *this*—or less *that*.” We may anxiously strive to measure up and do better. Or we may become more withdrawn or be tempted to quit. We may be tempted to compare ourselves to others and be confronted with a sense of inferiority and envy. Or we may choose to act as if we are better than we are, emphasizing our successes and minimizing our failures. There are a variety of ways we are tempted to respond.

Does any of this describe your journey? My hope in this article is to offer a different path forward for those who are struggling in ministry. This path does not require us to deny our weakness, creatureliness, and genuine limitations before God and others. On the contrary, it enables us to live and minister faithfully, honestly, and fruitfully amid weakness. It does not mean we will always have the right answers, but it points us to the right person—the One who promises to help in the very places that feel challenging. It is a path that does not erase our dependence and neediness but redirects us again and again to the One who is dependable. It changes the trajectory of what we do with our weakness and self-doubt. To discover this path, I will provide three important questions to wrestle through.

Three Orienting Questions

Here are three questions that Scripture invites us to wrestle with as we struggle in ministry. They help expose where our beliefs and thoughts often mislead us, and where thinking rightly can lead to encouraging reorientation and comfort.

Question 1: What is God’s heart toward you in your weakness and self-doubt? When you think of the specific places you feel insecure, it is worth reflecting on how you imagine God’s reaction. For those who struggle with a sense of incompetence in ministry, the default mental image of God can be someone who is chronically disappointed, shaking his head, and saying in exasperation: “Why can’t you get it together?” Or our image is a God who is far away or preoccupied with blessing other people and their ministries. He may be present but hands-off—far too content to watch us struggle from the sidelines, waiting for us to figure it out on our own. A counselee once shared in a counseling session, “It feels

like I keep falling off my bike and scraping my knees, and he's there and he sees what is happening, but he never comes to help. He's there but I feel like I'm on my own." Does this image resonate with you?

When we imagine his heart and posture toward us, we often believe God sees our weakness as a mistake or malfunction. It seems to disqualify us and prevent us from being all that God wants us to be. It holds us back from accomplishing what he wants to accomplish through us. We are getting in the way of his good work. Our neediness is a hindrance and liability—something to manage, fix, improve, and do away with. If we struggle with weakness and believe God is most interested in the strong, capable, and sufficient, then it seems there is no place for us. Yet our Lord invites us to listen humbly and to live by his Word. As we dig into Scripture, we see verses like these:

- “As a father shows compassion to his children, so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him. For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust” (Ps 103:13–14). We often imagine that God feels disappointed and exasperated by our weaknesses, but rather his response is understanding and fatherly compassion.
- We hear Christ’s words during his earthly ministry: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 5:3). When we face our poverty of spirit, we may feel the opposite—that we are cursed by God. We rarely feel blessed, so this verse can often surprise us.
- We hear the apostle Paul explain God’s criteria for choosing people to do his work:

For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God... as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.” (1 Cor 1:26–31)

People who would have felt disqualified from God's blessing and calling were often the ones he chose to accomplish his work. Paul makes clear that the ways of God are countercultural and surprising.

What is God's heart and posture toward you in your weakness? He chooses you. He blesses you. He feels compassion for you. You are known and seen—flaws, weaknesses, shortcomings, and all. Your God moves toward you, not away. He wants to help and come alongside you; he will not give up on you.

When we realize his heart of kindness toward us, we are better able to honestly reckon with our weaknesses. We can speak more easily to God and others about our insecurities and failures. We are finite. We are not the Christ. We will come up short.

We often believe God sees our weakness as a mistake or malfunction.

There may be tendencies toward sin that we will struggle with for the rest of our lives. There may be days we will be immersed in life, health, personal, or interpersonal circumstances that impact and limit us. There will be days we will lack the resources within ourselves to navigate our lives, ministries, and relationships. He does not expect us to graduate from dependence and neediness when we enter ministry. Ministry is not a call to be a superhero. Instead, God calls all of his people to childlike faith and calls the weary and heavy laden to "Come to me" (Matt 11:28).

In his book *The Imperfect Pastor*, Zack Eswine offers a hypothetical scenario of a married couple entering ministry for the first time and the pressures they can face.

When a couple enters ministry, the young love of ordinary life can get pressed out of them. She has often just given birth to a child. Or maybe they are newly married. But mostly they are already exhausted from their Bible-training pace, starting the work of ministry as those who already need a break. But to start work for God offers little time for residual fatigue. So the spouse goes with her ministry leader without roots to a new place with a new child and a newer job. The church

expects him to hit the ground running. He wants to show that he is worth their hire. He overworks all hours for the sake of Jesus while his new bride and newer baby try to learn to trust Jesus amid the dishwasher and Sesame Street, with no local friends and no firsthand knowledge of street names.

The single person graduating Bible training likewise fills all waking hours for God, exhausts herself, and tells herself that if she ever gets married, then she will slow down....

Why do we pressure our young ones in ministry to produce ministry results in this way? Why do they feel they must become something other than a normal human being...? Why do we imply that in ministry they must become someone other than a young couple in sacred love having their first baby and learning their first call in the world?¹

Whether we are having our first babies, relocating, or newly married and in a new ministry, many of us face circumstances that make us confront our humanity. We expect ourselves to keep pushing forward in ways that disregard who we are and our current season of life. We disregard our health, limitations, life transitions, and personal hardships and serve beyond our capacity—all in an attempt to accomplish good things in the name of Jesus. We forget that we may still be new to our responsibilities and that it is legitimate to need time to learn and grow. Perhaps the expectations we have for ourselves, or that we assume God has of us, are not necessarily *his* expectations for us. Scripture compels us to rethink these expectations, to consider we have a God who knows our frame and who knows that we are human beings intended to live and do ministry as human beings—nothing more, and nothing less. Even when we are tempted to be impatient with ourselves and others are impatient with us, he directs his compassion toward us as a father to a child in ways that

1. Zack Eswine, *The Imperfect Pastor: Discovering Joy in Our Limitations through a Daily Apprenticeship with Jesus* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), chap. 2, Kindle.

baffle and humble us. By the grace of Christ, we are granted a safe space in him to grow, to be in process, and to be human.

Question 2: *What makes your life count? What makes you worthy and “enough” in ministry?* Our culture and society try to answer these questions in a variety of ways, but *success* is at the heart of them. Many of these answers have also seeped into Christian culture. We are told we can find success in metrics like our accomplishments, popularity, church size, fame, money, or visible ministry fruit. We try to measure up to what the people around us are doing. We may be tempted to envy and determine our worth based on what other people think of us.

What makes your life count? How do you assess your worth? Years ago, I was preparing to lead a ministry event. It was my first time, and I was feeling anxious and underprepared. My mind generated various worst-case scenarios. What if I fell short of expectations, and exposed myself to be the fraud that I was? What if I disappointed them, and they all left feeling like I was unhelpful and wasted their time? The event was in New York City. On my way there, I stopped by to visit my brother and his family who live in northern New Jersey. As soon as I arrived at the house, my four-year-old niece came outside and wanted to play. I spent the next hour pushing her on the swings, pretending to be a pirate, and helping her across the monkey bars. When it was time to go inside, she turned around and reached out her hand to mine. She looked at me with big eyes and said, “Gugu (which means aunt in Chinese), after you finish, will you come back here so we can play?”

I replied, “Yes, I’m coming back here. You’ll be sleeping though, but you will see me in the morning when you wake up.”

And as we held hands together, walking through the door, she said, “Yay! I can’t wait.”

This was a simple moment. This little girl had no idea what my ministry event was. She did not care if her aunt impressed everyone or humiliated herself. She only cared that her aunt would come back to play. Her love for me would remain unchanged. When I woke up in my brother’s guest bedroom the next morning—post-ministry success or failure—I would hear her banging on the door to my room early in the morning, her excited yells alerting me it was time to wake up and play.

Sometimes that is what we need to be reminded of before God. In God's case, he did care about my event. Yet at the same time, we need to be reminded that regardless of ministry success or failure—in a counseling session, a sermon, a meeting—he will still love us. He is the One who chose us before the foundation of the world, before we could succeed or fail at anything (Eph 1:4). The apostle Paul prays that we would know “how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ” for us (Eph 3:18). Indeed, there is nothing—no weakness, no ministry failure—that will separate us from his love (Rom 8:38–39).

Christ does not call us to throw away our ambitions, but he wants us to be ambitious about the right things.

Ultimately, as we mine Scripture, we are invited to know that even if our efforts come up short, we still matter to the One whose opinion matters most. Each of us can know that whether our endeavors today seem like a success or a failure, we will still be loved. We can know when we sleep tonight, and Lord willing wake up tomorrow, that we will get out of bed and still be pursued and loved by him. We will still matter in his gracious, merciful care.

There is one more aspect to this question of what makes your ministry worthy and enough. Whatever metrics you use to measure your success, Christ in his mercy will likely confront you about them at some point. This is not because the criteria are all wrong, but because they are not what ultimately matters to him. Christ does not call us to throw away our ambitions, but he wants us to be ambitious about the right things.

Consider these two examples:

- Christ says: “But whoever would be great among you must be your servant...for even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matt 20:26–28). In Christ's kingdom, true greatness is not measured by prestige, reputation, and popularity before others. What truly matters and makes our lives count is when we serve others.
- The apostle Paul shares this with the Corinthians:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. (1 Cor 13:1–3)

Paul tells them that they can do seemingly great things and have seemingly great and esteemed gifts—but if they do not love, they are nothing and gain nothing. While we ourselves may be tempted to chase after great gifts, it is sincere love that truly matters in God's economy.

These realities are seen in Jesus' own ministry. His ministry did not measure up to the people's metrics of success. He was grievously betrayed and abandoned even by his disciples. The people were perplexed by his death as he failed to fulfill their expectations that the Messiah would overthrow the Roman government. He was mocked and scorned, chosen by the Jewish crowd to be crucified instead of a notorious prisoner. His crucifixion was a visible display to the people of shame and weakness, not a display of honor, strength, and victory. Taken together, his experience was the *opposite* of the approval, popularity, and version of success that we often aspire to.

When we look to Jesus and his earthly ministry, we see the many ways it failed to conform to what we often believe makes our lives and ministries worthwhile. Therefore, when it comes to what makes our lives and ministries count in God's sight, we can aspire to follow in Jesus' footsteps. We do not need to be dominated by pressure to accomplish visible earthly success, but rather commit to a life and ministry of humble servanthood and sincere love. That is what truly counts.

To add a final note to this discussion, I would like to share an email I received from David Powlison, a former faculty member and executive director of CCEF. I shared my nervousness over a speaking event with him. I come back to his response often to reorient myself.

Dear Esther,

It makes sense that you feel nerves before speaking. At the same time, I've found three things that make a huge difference. First, love the men and women with whom you speak. When I care about them, I'm not thinking about myself. Love is freeing. Second, be faithful to what is true to God. When the message is his, I'm not thinking about myself. Faith is freeing. Third, personally need the very truths you share with your beloved brothers and sisters, because they also need what you need. Humility is freeing.

In other words, when we live Ephesians 4:15, we are simply there to serve words of life to our brothers and sisters, not to be scrutinized by them about our opinions/skills/smarts/wittiness/eloquence/etc./etc. Faith, love, and humility are freedom.

We'll be praying for you, and look forward to hearing how it goes.

Blessings,
David

Faith, love, and humility are freedom. In weakness and self-doubt, we are not sure we can deliver the most memorable sermon. We are not sure if our next article will be helpful. We are not sure we can give our congregants or our counselees everything they need to hear to live with renewed strength, conviction, and hope. We are not sure we will have all the right answers or that we will measure up to other people's expectations for us. That is why David's email helped me. It changed the inner monologue in my head to say:

"There are many things I am not sure of. I am not sure if I will succeed in any worldly sense. I am not sure if people will be impressed by me or turned off. I am not sure if they will feel helped by my ministry or feel like I wasted their time. There are many things I may not be able to successfully accomplish through my talk, but can I seek to genuinely love the people I help? Can I

aspire to stay faithful to what is true to God in what I say and do? Can I need for myself the very truths I share?”

The pressure to please, win over, impress, and measure up to people’s expectations gave way to the conviction to be loving, faithful, and humble. These are very different metrics than the ones we often live by. They are metrics that matter to our God and reflect the ministry of Christ. These metrics give us renewed vision, humility, and courage. They give us sanity to engage in the work before us—even, and especially, as weak, imperfect, finite creatures.

Ask yourself then: What makes my life count? What makes my ministry worthy and enough? How does that conform to Jesus’ own ministry and the metrics that Scripture calls me to evaluate?

Question 3: *Where will you go when you come up short? To whom will you turn?* We often grow discouraged in our weakness because of a subtle, at times unnoticed, assumption that we must rely on ourselves—that “life is up to me.” In one sense, our actions do have consequences. Hard, faithful work matters. Diligence matters and sloth is sinful. Yet sometimes we assume that everything falls on our shoulders. If we don’t do it, who will? If we don’t get it together, won’t it all fall apart? We feel anxious, alone, and pressured and

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are prone to look inward at our own resources and capacity. This often leads to one of two outcomes. First, we may feel we need to muster up the resources within ourselves and be tempted to overwork and overcommit. Or we look inward and find little or no resources within ourselves and retreat in despair. Both options can leave us feeling depleted and do not lead to the flourishing we long for. This third question helps us discover another way when we ask ourselves: Who ultimately makes your life okay? Where is hope found for the well-being of yourself, your loved ones, and the people you minister to?

When we live in a world where it is all up to us, God is functionally erased from our reality. We forget that we are beloved sons and daughters. There is a notable gap between what we know to be true and how

we live and do ministry. We develop an orphan mentality and lose sight of what we actually have:

- a loving Father who knows what we need before we ask, who gives good gifts to his children (Matt 6:32; 7:11),
- a Shepherd who walks with us, even through the valley of the shadow of death (Ps 23:4),
- a High Priest who experienced our plight so he could sympathize with our weaknesses (Heb 4:15),
- a Provider who feeds the birds of the air and clothes the lilies of the field with extravagance (Matt 6:25–30), and
- a personal Savior who knows when sparrows fall and the number of hairs on your head, who knows you and knows what you face so personally and so intimately (Matt 10:29–31).

When we remember who our Lord and Savior is, we find hope and comfort amid our weakness and self-doubt. For many of us, this is a lifelong journey.

Sometimes, in his mercy, God lets us go through seasons where we seem to reach the end of ourselves. After earnest attempts, trying all possible options, and doing our best—there are times we still come up short. This is a scary place to be if we functionally live as though we can only rely on ourselves. But reaching the end of ourselves can become an important beginning. It can become the beginning of no longer placing our hope and trust in ourselves, but rather placing the hope and trust for our well-being and our ministry's well-being in Christ, where it always belonged. We find sanity when we realize we cannot save or fix ourselves and all our difficult circumstances. We find comfort when we remember that hope for our congregants, counselees, children, and families will not ultimately be secured by our efforts.

Reaching the end of ourselves becomes a starting point where we can hear Christ's kind and gracious invitation once again—"Come to me." We receive that invitation as we acknowledge we cannot do life and ministry apart from his grace. As we admit our neediness and receive Christ's invitation, we can taste and see the depths of the goodness and love of Christ in ways we would have never known if we were competent and strong on our own. In the rubble of discouragement and failure, our Savior has a way of bringing about redemption that somehow turns out

to be better than what we could have imagined. The assumption “It’s all up to me” gives way to a sanity that echoes the apostle Paul when he says, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord” (1 Cor 1:31).

We Are Needy and Needed

As we wrestle through these three questions, we arrive at a summary conclusion which I learned from my colleague, Ed Welch: we are called to walk as people who are both *needy* and *needed*.² As people in ministry, we can often be more comfortable and familiar with being needed, but it is the purpose of this article to invite each of us to acknowledge that we are needy as well. Neediness is not a malfunction; it is God’s design for the people he has called to accomplish his purposes.

Success and a blessed life are ultimately found in servanthood and ordinary love.

When we live honestly out of our neediness and realize we don’t have to pretend, we navigate the pressures of ministry differently.

- We are quicker to turn to prayer. We will prioritize it with renewed desperation and earnestness. We will be intentional about speaking to the Lord about our honest burdens, fears, and shortcomings. We find ourselves more often confessing sin. We may hear ourselves more frequently cry out, “Jesus, help.”
- We identify one or two people we can honestly share our insecurities and burdens with and ask them to pray for us. Even when it is difficult to find safe people—I know this is uniquely challenging for pastors and their wives—we may find ourselves prayerfully considering creative ways to seek out people and communities where we have permission to be finite human beings, not superheroes.
- We pursue conversations with other people more often as we recognize the limitations of our own perspectives. With diligence, we ask for help with difficult and complex situations.

2. You can read more about this in his book *Side by Side: Walking with Others in Wisdom and Love* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015).

All the while, we are still needed. God has given each of us unique gifts to steward. He has placed certain people in your life that you have the opportunity to serve. Your particular life experiences give you unique perspective that others can be sharpened by. Even your weaknesses and failures can become an invitation to greater honesty and transparency, in which you model to others what godly, sane neediness can look like. To be needed means that even in the midst of shortcomings and discouragement, you simply do the next thing—simple obedience, simple faithfulness. Some of those tasks may be unseen, overlooked, and underappreciated by others. Yet we remember that we seek to please the Lord, who often has a different agenda for our lives than the success and competence we often imagine and even fantasize about—the type of success and competence we can be convinced would be maximally useful to God’s work and purposes.

When we give ourselves to the upside-down kingdom of Christ, we recognize that success and a blessed life are ultimately found in servanthood and ordinary love. With that, we seek to do our best in ministry with what resources we have regardless of visible results. We pray for grace to know his heart, to know what matters to him, and to know his help for us in our weakness. We walk and serve by faith, in reliance on Christ and others—needed and needy—by design. And we await the day we will finally see him face-to-face and hear his words to us, “Well done, good and faithful servant.” We will know then that our feeble efforts were not in vain. It will be his eyes of approval, his praise, and his commendation that will matter most of all. May our Lord and Savior encourage and comfort us in the very ways we need today. May he grant us strength to walk forward in our callings for his glory.

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